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In 1999 General Charles Krulak introduced to the United States Marine Corps the concept of the *strategic corporal* in the widely read essay "The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War." General Krulak indicated that, given the modern battlefield's new character, the actions of a Marine corporal have strategic impact. Over the last decade, the term *strategic corporal* became mythologized within the military culture; forever associated with negative consequences. Leaders now are concerned with the perceived risk to a strategic outcome emanating from the lowest of levels. In an effort to manage this perceived risk, senior leaders have elevated decision authorities far away from anyone but themselves. A thorough analysis of a series of contemporary historical case studies debunks the myth of the strategic corporal and demonstrates that tactical level incidents alone do not alter the strategic outcome of a conflict. The conclusion of this paper restores balance and demonstrates errors in policy or strategic level decisions ultimately affect the outcome of an operation and because the strategic corporal is a myth, recommends joint and service doctrine must be purged while reinforcing the essential elements of mission command.

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**JOINT ADVANCED WARFIGHTING SCHOOL**



**DEBUNKING THE MYTH OF THE STRATEGIC CORPORAL**

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# DEBUNKING THE MYTH OF THE OF STRATEGIC CORPORAL

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Joint Advanced Warfighting School in partial satisfaction of the requirements of a Master of Science Degree in Joint Campaign Planning and Strategy. The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Joint Forces Staff College or the Department of Defense. This paper is entirely my own work except as documented in footnotes.

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## ABSTRACT

In 1999 General Charles Krulak introduced to the United States Marine Corps the concept of the *strategic corporal* in the widely read essay "The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War." General Krulak indicated that, given the modern battlefield's new character, the actions of a Marine corporal have strategic impact. Over the last decade, the term *strategic corporal* became mythologized within the military culture; forever associated with negative consequences. Now leaders are concerned with the perceived risk to a strategic outcome emanating from the lowest of levels. In an effort to manage this perceived risk, senior leaders elevated decision authorities far away from anyone but themselves. A thorough analysis of a series of contemporary historical case studies debunks the myth of the strategic corporal and demonstrates that tactical level incidents alone do not alter the strategic outcome of a conflict. The conclusion of this paper restores balance and demonstrates errors in policy or strategic level decisions ultimately affect the outcome of an operation and because the strategic corporal is a myth, recommends joint and service doctrine must be purged while reinforcing the essential elements of mission command.

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# CHAPTER 1

## Introduction

In 1999 General Charles Krulak introduced to the United States Marine Corps the concept of the *strategic corporal* in the widely read essay “The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War.” General Krulak indicated that, given the modern battlefield’s new character, the actions of a Marine corporal could have strategic impact. Although General Krulak’s thoughts intended to highlight the positive results, this concept, in this culture, has currently become more insidious. Over the last decade, the term *strategic corporal* became mythologized within the military culture; forever associated with negative consequences. Now leaders are concerned with the perceived risk to a strategic outcome emanating from the lowest of levels. It has even become a shibboleth; service doctrine explicitly warns of this dangerous phenomenon. In an effort to manage this perceived risk, senior leaders elevated decision authorities far away from anyone but themselves. The elevation of decision-making severely undermines the military’s philosophy of mission command—the execution of disciplined initiative at the lowest level to achieve the mission—and most significantly erodes the bedrock of trust between commanders.

This paper will explore the origin of the idea of the strategic corporal and traces its trajectory from its positive intent to its doppelganger, doomsayer variant. A presentation of a series of contemporary historical case studies will follow to debunk the myth of the strategic corporal and demonstrate that tactical level incidents alone do not alter the strategic outcome of a conflict. By removing the fear of the strategic corporal commanders can return to reality to recognize that errors in policy or strategic level

decisions ultimately affect the outcome of an operation not random individuals.

Furthermore, because the strategic corporal is a myth, joint and service doctrine must be purged of this reference and the essential elements of mission command must be reinforced. Freed from the fear of the strategic corporal, commanders must return to circulating the battlefield to provide situational context to tactical formations to foster trust and reinforce disciplined initiative. The commander must, as he always must do, arm his tactical commanders with strategic and operational situational understanding, so that they may fully exercise disciplined initiative, while prudently executing delegated decision-making authorities in any operating environment.



## CHAPTER 2

### The Concept and Changing Nature of the Strategic Corporal

In an effort to gain an appreciation for how the disparity between the original and subsequent connotations of the strategic corporal came to pass, it is necessary to explore this term's etymology. During a speech to the National Press Club, in 1997 General Charles Krulak, the Commandant of the Marine Corps, expressed his idea of the future battlefield.

In one moment in time, our service members will be feeding and clothing displaced refugees, providing humanitarian assistance. In the next moment, they will be holding two warring tribes apart - conducting peacekeeping operations - and, finally, they will be fighting a highly lethal mid-intensity battle - all on the same day. . . all within three city blocks.<sup>1</sup>

The implication of Krulak's idea was that a new type of Marine Corps leader was needed—capable of navigating block to block, mindful of the changing environment occurring within a very limited time and space, and prepared to handle every challenge. Two years later, Krulak coined the term “strategic corporal” to denote the kind of low-level tactical leader he envisioned in the three-block scenario; who could support strategic outcomes even while carrying out tactical missions. As Krulak phrased it, “His actions, therefore, will directly impact the outcome of the larger operation; and he will become. . . the Strategic Corporal.”<sup>2</sup>

Krulak's powerful image of Marine Corps corporals potentially generating effects far greater than their rank and responsibilities, aimed at promoting tactical leader development and preparation for complex, dynamic, and amorphous small unit actions on

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1. Charles C. Krulak, USMC "The Three Block War: Fighting in Urban Areas." *Vital Speeches of the Day*. New York: December 15, 1997. Vol. 64, Issue. 5: p. 139-142.

2. Charles C. Krulak, "The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War," *Marines Magazine*, January 1999, [http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/usmc/strategic\\_corporal.htm](http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/usmc/strategic_corporal.htm) (accessed December 29, 2014).

the contemporary battlefield.<sup>3</sup> Krulak outlined the following three approaches to developing strategic corporals: the active development and sustainment of character, a lifelong devotion to professional development supported by the Marine Corps institutions, and the creation and sustainment of raw leadership.<sup>4</sup>

Krulak's strategic corporal concept was born in the strategic environment of the 1990s. This period was marked with great instability as the Cold War ended, and a new world order solidified. A multitude of ethnic conflicts emerged in Europe and central Asia.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile brutal civil wars ravaged several African nations initiating instabilities that still resonate today.<sup>6</sup> With the specter of the Soviet Union gone and a rapid victory won against Iraq in the 1991 Gulf War, American foreign policy shifted to a security strategy of engagement and enlargement. The 1995 National Security Strategy codified promoting democracy as a policy directly linked to the United State's core national interests.<sup>7</sup> Military power now could be employed along a full continuum of operations ranging from peacekeeping to major combat operations.<sup>8</sup> This strategy drove the American military engagement in Somalia, Bosnia, Albania, Kosovo, Macedonia, Haiti, Liberia, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone all of which were a combination of combat and non-combat tasks Krulak described in his three block war scenario.

Following the National Security Strategy, the U.S. Department of Defense issued a joint publication on military operations other than war. General John Shalikashvili, the

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3. Krulak, "The Strategic Corporal."

4. Ibid.

5. H W. Brands, Darren J. Pierson, and Reynolds S. Kiefer, eds., *Foreign Relations and the Presidency*, vol. 3, *The Use of Force After the Cold War* (College Station Texas: Texas A & M University Press, 2000), 3.

6. Ibid. 4.

7. William J. Clinton, *A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement* (Washington, DC: The White House, February 1995), 1-33.

8. Ibid. 22.

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, advised the joint force in the introduction that while, “goals and end-states may not be crystal clear,” rigorous efforts in planning and execution were essential for success.<sup>9</sup> The 1995, Joint Publication 3-07, Joint Doctrine for Military Operations other than War, underscored the primacy of political objectives, “at every level from strategic to tactical,” and warned of the potential impact of inappropriate actions by junior leaders which may have adverse political effects.<sup>10</sup> This marked the first time doctrine linked policy directly to the actions of junior leaders conducting tactical engagements.

As a result of the security situation of the 1990s and its corresponding military engagements running the gamut from high intensity combat to peacekeeping, it is not surprising that Krulak’s three-block war concept took hold in the minds of leaders and doctrine writers. However, Krulak’s tactical leader development concept embodied in the term “strategic corporal” had become something different and elevated to a doctrinal truism. In doctrine, the new security environment bred not a dynamic adaptive small unit leader, but a dangerous figure who threatened strategic disaster.

### *The Changing Nature of the Strategic Corporal*

So, when and how was General Krulak’s original concept perverted? When did the doomsayer variant replace the original and positive contributor strategic corporal? Certainly it began with the first linkage of a junior leader’s actions generating a negative political outcome in the 1995 joint publication on military operations other than war. Yet, this single reference alone could not be sufficient to shape the current dominant idea

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9. U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Doctrine for Military Operations other than War*, Joint Publication 3-07, (Washington DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, June 16, 1995), 1.

10. Ibid. vii-viii, I-2.

that the strategic corporal is a liability or operational-strategic risk who needed restraint and tight control.

Since 1995, references to low-level tactical actions generating strategic consequences as an accepted truism increased in frequency not only in American doctrine and professional journals but also in British and Australian Army doctrinal publications and professional journals as well. In 2002, the Australian Chief of Army, Lieutenant General Peter Leahy, stated, “The era of the strategic corporal is here. The soldier of today must possess professional mastery of warfare, but match this with political and media sensitivity.”<sup>11</sup> Three years later in response to the Australian Chief of Army’s vision of junior leaders, Major Lynda Liddy published an article featured in the *Australian Army Journal* titled “The Strategic Corporal: Some Requirements in Training and Education.” Her article presented three aims: explore the idea of a strategic corporal and codify a definition, examine the current Australian Army training systems to assess their capability to produce a strategic corporal, and finally to offer recommendations for changes to land forces training.<sup>12</sup> Most helpful was her codified definition of the strategic corporal:

A strategic corporal is a soldier that possesses technical mastery in the skill of arms while being aware that his judgment, decision-making and action can all have strategic and political consequences that can affect the outcome of a given mission and the reputation of his country.<sup>13</sup>

Major Liddy’s writings and definition are in complete congruence with General Krulak’s original idea and intent for guiding small unit leader development.

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11. Lynda Liddy, “The Strategic Corporal: Some Requirements in Training and Education,” *Australian Army Journal: For the Profession of Arms*, II, no. 2 (Autumn 2005): 139, [http://www.army.gov.au/~media/Content/Our%20future/Publications/AAJ/2000s/2005/AAJ\\_2005\\_2.pdf](http://www.army.gov.au/~media/Content/Our%20future/Publications/AAJ/2000s/2005/AAJ_2005_2.pdf) (accessed December 30, 2014).

12. Liddy, “The Strategic Corporal,” 140.

13. Ibid.

It is however, the British who actually begin to adulterate the concept. Perhaps influenced by JP 3-07, the 2004 British Joint Warfare Publication (JWP) 3-50, *The Military Contributions to Peace Support Operations (PSOs)*, articulated the problem of the strategic corporal:

In PSOs, action taken at the lowest tactical level may need to be especially responsive to strategic decision-making, with the tactical outcomes having immediate strategic significance. For example, the comments or actions of a corporal may prompt ministerial statements as a result of media reporting. This may lead to political and military leaders at the strategic level wishing directly to influence the lowest tactical actions, missing out the intermediate operational and higher tactical levels of command. This compression is exacerbated in the multinational environment that dominates PSO. The effects of 'reach back' in to several national capitals may be seen as fragmenting the will of the international community to achieve the outcome it desires to see. In turn this may undermine the Campaign Authority by placing restrictions on the execution of the PSO.<sup>14</sup>

Here is a completely different corporal, quite different from the corporal General Krulak, General Leahy, and Major Liddy portrayed. The concept of compression of the levels of war reflect Krulak's three-block war image, but it turns the strategic corporal's role upside down. Krulak saw the corporal as a positive actor whose decisions contributed to a decisive outcome. The British version creates a corporal who uncomprehendingly straddles the tactical, operational, and strategic levels of war. It is this compressed environment that actually magnifies every seemingly inconsequential action. The implication here is that the small unit leader has no control—his influence, whether positive or negative, is purely random.

By 2006 the U.S. Army and Marine Corps Counterinsurgency manual and the 2010 British counter insurgency field manual shared this concept of compressed levels of

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14. Joint Doctrine and Concepts Center, British Ministry of Defense, *The Military Contribution to Peace Support Operations*, Joint Warfare Publication 3-50, 2nd ed., (London: Ministry of Defence, June 2004), 2-14-2-15.

war and is a catalyst for the redefinition of the strategic corporal. Now applied to counterinsurgency, the strategic corporal presented both opportunity and risk. Doctrine now moved towards requiring higher-level commanders to support junior level leaders in their endeavors to prevent seemingly innocuous tactical actions from becoming strategic threats. The American and British counter insurgency manuals states:

“strategic corporals . . . . make decisions at the tactical level that can have strategic consequences, both good and bad. Senior commanders set the proper direction and climate through training, education and clearly articulated statements of intent and concepts of operation. Mission command requires them to trust their subordinates to do the right thing. Training and education underpin this relationship. Leaders must be trained and educated to adapt to local conditions, understand the legal and moral implications of their actions, and exercise initiative and sound judgment in accordance with their senior commanders’ intent.<sup>15</sup>

Krulak’s concept of the strategic corporal born of the post Cold-War uncertainties and diverse missions, had now been transmuted by the Global War on Terror into an entirely new construct to fit the now dominant focus of the military in counterinsurgency. The strategic corporal of the British doctrine had now become a potential liability in the delicate art of winning hearts and minds. Doctrine defines the role of senior leaders as training and educating specifically to avoid any missteps by subordinates; while conveniently nesting this imperative under the concept of mission command. Subordinates must be properly prepared to do what is right and act within the commander’s intent. Krulak’s idea as succinctly articulated by the Australians became perverted in this sense. The strategic corporal moved from a 1997 idea to support an emphasis in developing leaders adaptable to new environments to, the 2010 version of the

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15. Chief of the General Staff, Land Warfare Development Group, British Ministry of Defense, *Army Field Manual Countering Insurgency*, Volume 1- Part 10, (London: Ministry of Defence, January 2010), 3-16 and U.S. Department of the Army, *Counterinsurgency*, Field Manual 3-24 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Army, December 15, 2006), 1-28.

deleterious strategic corporal with the emphasis on commanders requiring a close overwatch of subordinates who can influence strategic outcomes directly through tactical actions.

The new environment of counterinsurgency, often played out on the global stage, certainly influenced the American and British authors' heightened sensitivity to the role of the strategic corporal. This sensitivity was reflected in a Small Wars Journal article published in 2007 entitled "The Strategic Corporal vs. The Strategic Cameraman." The author presented a new dimension to Krulak's three-block war—every action on the battlefield now takes place in a media saturated environment. Iraqi insurgents, for example, used cameramen to capture and globally broadcast videos of successful attacks to gain a strategic propaganda advantage.<sup>16</sup> By the time this article was written, however, Krulak's original concept of the strategic corporal had undergone a distinct transformation. Manchester articulated the new concept precisely:

But what of the term "strategic corporal" itself? As an institution, it seems the Marine Corps today only invokes this term when admonishing leaders to watch out for the press. For example, if your Marine screws up and CNN is present, then he'll become a strategic corporal. . . Pay attention the next time someone uses this term and note two things: the context usually involves the media; and the connotation is almost always negative.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, the British concept of compressed levels of war, combined with an all-pervasive media environment cemented the image of the strategic corporal as a threat to the successful outcome of any operation.

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16. Josh Manchester, "The Strategic Corporal vs. The Strategic Cameraman," Small War Journal, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/the-strategic-corporal-vs-the-strategic-cameraman> (accessed December 31, 2014).

17. Ibid.

The Marine Corps published a combat development and integration pamphlet in 2008 to introduce a new set of training approaches outlining the role of the strategic corporal. The official definition is very close to Krulak's description:

The strategic corporal is a Marine who has mastered Marine basic skills, is tactically and technically proficient, is morally and ethically adept, savvy in both language and culture, mentally agile, physically fit, prepared to act and lead in a decentralized environment and is empowered by the trust and confidence of his seniors and subordinates.<sup>18</sup>

However, the pamphlet presents the actual influence of the new interpretation of the strategic corporal in the introduction. "The idea of the strategic corporal expands the idea that a Marine's actions at the tactical level may have strategic consequences."<sup>19</sup> Clearly, the doctrinal assertions and perceived threat engendered by media coverage created a remarkable shift in mindset. While the strategic corporal was still devoted in terms of leader development, the connotation of the strategic corporal was negative. These two ideas, in effect, could not exist harmoniously. There could be only one strategic corporal. Despite the stated positive intent, the simple sentence that tactical actions have strategic consequences ensured the deleterious strategic corporal would dominate thinking and perceptions.

Between 2011 and 2014 with the publication of Joint Publication 3-0 (Joint Operations) and the updated 2014 version of Field Manual 3-34 (Counterinsurgency), the strategic corporal is not mentioned. Nonetheless, the doctrinal concept planted in 2004 endured—the implicit and unproven, yet accepted truth that the strategic threat of the unintended consequences of ill-contrived tactical decisions and actions of the strategic

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18. United States Marine Corps Combat Development and Integration, *The Strategic Corporal*, Commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps. (Quantico: September, 2008), 3.

19. Ibid. 1.



corporal could undermine the higher commander's strategic outcomes. Whereas the risk is slightly veiled, the perceived risk and threat of the strategic corporal rings loudly and clearly.

### *A New environment and the Tipping Point Model*

Between 2003 and 2007 the strategic corporal transformed from an empowered junior leader capable of winning the war to its alter ego capable of wrecking and ruining the strategic outcome with undisciplined and dreadful tactical actions. As the 2008 Marine Corps pamphlet indicates, the devolution of the strategic corporal remained largely unchanged from Krulak's original concept. But the connotation of the strategic corporal differed. It is clear from the survey of American, Australian, and British doctrinal writing that a tipping point occurred to redefine the concept of the strategic corporal.

Malcolm Gladwell provides a useful framework in his best selling book *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*. Gladwell defines a tipping point as that, "dramatic moment . . . when everything can change all at once," when, "ideas . . . and messages and behaviors spread like viruses."<sup>20</sup> Gladwell outlines three rules for defining a tipping point: the law of the few, the stickiness factor, and the power of context.<sup>21</sup>

The law of the few indicates a critical component of spreading an idea is the very nature of the messenger.<sup>22</sup> He describes these messengers in three ways: connectors—individuals who know a great number of people within a diverse social network;

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20. Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2000), 7-9.

21. Gladwell, 29.

22. Ibid. 91.

mavens—who are experts at sharing and connecting people to new information, and persuaders—who urge other people to accept their point of view.

Gladwell's next rule is the stickiness factor. A message content is so well packaged that it sticks in the mind; creating a memorable impact under the proper circumstances.<sup>23</sup>

The final rule of the tipping point is the power of context, in which a message's influence relies on the conditions and circumstances of the times and places in which it occur.<sup>24</sup> Using Gladwell's approach it is easy to trace how the message of the strategic corporal took hold in the military culture, transcending national boundaries.

#### *Gladwell's Model Applied—the Strategic Corporal*

General Charles Krulak, the Commandant of the Marine Corps, first propagated the strategic corporal idea in his 1999 essay in Marines. Western military leaders across the globe latched onto this idea with fervor. The influence, power, and persuasiveness of these leaders are self evident, especially in military hierarchical organizations. There is no doubt that these leaders, at the pinnacle of command, knew a large and diverse number of people. They were experts at sharing new information and ideas, and urged others to accept their point of view. As leaders of their respective services or nations militaries, their messengers (or mavens) were authors of professional journals, doctrine, and Internet blogs, while they wanted to spread the idea of the importance of junior leadership.

General Krulak crafted his idea simply, yet brilliantly. The thought that a single corporal, in a corps of nearly 200,000 men and women, could influence strategy was

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23. Ibid. 92.

24. Ibid. 139.

powerful. This idea also directly appealed to the new millennial generation of service men and women. Although its unlikely that Krulak anticipated a massive generational shift, his idea of the empowered individual struck right at the heart of the millennial generations' high self-esteem and narcissistic tendencies. In her 2006 book, *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled--and More Miserable Than Ever Before*, author Jean M. Twenge identifies clear sociological evidence that supports a disproportionate rise in feelings of entitlement and narcissism in the millennial generation—born generally between 1980 and 2000.<sup>25</sup> This circumstance of cultural change explains how Krulak's notion of an empowered strategic corporal appealed to the leaders of this generation.

Context is a contributing factor to an idea reaching a tipping point. Gladwell's analogy of epidemics mutating and spreading with the slightest change to the environment is useful to understanding how the strategic corporal concept mutated from positive variant to doomsayer variant. Krulak's initial scenario was imaginary—in just a few short years it became reality. Combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan were a far departure from 1990's era military operations other than war, which formed the basis of Krulak's strategic corporal. Whereas initial combat operations went exceedingly well, a rising insurgency coupled with increased casualties changed the atmosphere. Actual enemies were tough to identify while hidden dangers, such as snipers and improvised explosive devices, wreaked havoc on the coalitions troops. These difficult conditions created a sense of frustration that permeated the force. As in all wars, some illegal, immoral, and unethical activities occurred on the battlefield. Examples of dishonorable

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25. Jean M. Twenge, *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled--and More Miserable Than Ever Before* (New York: Atria Paperback, 2014), 68-73.

incidents include, the U.S. Army's detainee abuse at Abu Ghraib, the British detainee abuse in Basra, the U.S. Marine's Haditha incident, and epitomize the outcomes of a frustrated force.

Gladwell would refer to these illegal events occurring on the battlefield as Broken Windows. Broken Windows, a community policing theory, purports that a single broken window in a community creates a climate that encourages more crime. Perhaps the first and most widely publicized Broken Window was the Abu Ghraib detainee abuse scandal. First revealed in November 2003 by an Associated Press print news report, the story gained little traction; however, on 28 April 2004, the story was featured in a televised *60 Minutes II* report. Dan Rather, a well-known CBS reporter, serving as a maven, presented the story with graphic pictures of American male and female soldiers abusing Iraqi detainees. The salacious report quickly captured headlines around the world. The Vatican foreign minister, for example, reacted by describing the Abu Ghraib incident as a far worse blow to the United States than the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, and predicted the incident would fuel conflict between Western and Islamic countries.<sup>26</sup>

American, British, and Australian service members, inculcated with the idea of the strategic corporal, witnessed the actions of a few soldiers result in a domestic and an international crisis unlike anything in recent memory. If any battlefield event of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century had strategic influence it was Abu Ghraib—and the strategic corporal was seemed to bear the whole of responsibility.

As a result of applying Gladwell's Tipping Point model using the strategic corporal, the Abu Ghraib detainee abuse—in the context of the media saturated Global

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26. Associated Press, "Vatican calls prison abuse a bigger blow to U.S. than Sept. 11", *USA Today*, May 12, 2004. [http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/world/iraq/2004-05-12-vatican-iraqi-abuse\\_x.htm](http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/world/iraq/2004-05-12-vatican-iraqi-abuse_x.htm) (accessed January 1, 2015).

War on Terror—is likely the single event that completely mutated the Krulak’s strategic corporal into its doomsayer variant. Once the concept tipped to a negative version other battlefield incidents were quickly credited to the strategic corporal and struck fear into the minds of operational, strategic, and policy level leaders and their staffs. The strategic corporal, divorced from the three-block war, now in the context of counter-insurgency and information operations, became a monstrous reality threatening the outcomes of operations and achievements of objectives. Despite the services’ doctrinal attempts to resuscitate the original and positive concept of the strategic corporal concept they lost it to the weight of what Gladwell describes as a new stickiness factor—an irresistible idea, fostered by mavens and persuaders that results in a truism.

#### *Senior Leader Perceptions and Risk Mitigation*

As Gladwell’s model indicates, the major consequence of the mutation of the strategic corporal concept is an increased perception of strategic risk emanating from the lowest of tactical formations. As described earlier in this paper, both joint and service specific doctrine, clearly articulated the strategic risk regarding the unintended consequences of iniquitous tactical actions. The former United States Ambassador to Afghanistan and retired Army Lieutenant General Karl W. Eikenberry exemplifies the assimilation of the irresistible idea. Even though he understands and can articulate the original concept, he cannot resist bowing to the new perceived inherited wisdom. In his 2013 *Washington Quarterly* essay titled “Reassessing the All-Volunteer Force,” Ambassador Eikenberry’s reflects on Krulak’s concept of the strategic corporal. He begins by describing the concept exactly how Krulak first envisaged it—a well-trained

and empowered junior leader. But showing the influence of the stickiness factor,

Eikenberry shifts to highlight the danger these corporals present:

[C]onsistent with the term “strategic corporal,” we have seen how similar violations of discipline and regulations have had catastrophic consequences during the wars we have waged in the 21st century. Fallout from the Abu Ghraib scandal, murders of civilians, and violations of enemy corpses are illustrations . . . . [I]f singular failures of the strategic corporal can and do have strategic consequences, at what point must the strategic commander be held accountable? In other words, shouldn’t strategic commanders, in offering courses of action to their civilian leaders, make explicit the risk of plan failure that could occur from actions by a strategic corporal? And if the risk is deemed too great, shouldn’t the approach be changed? If the risk is to be absorbed, who should absorb it? When the President of the United States has to repeatedly apologize for the misdeeds of members of our armed forces on the global stage, we are not well served. Either the doctrine is too problematic and needs to be reconsidered, or there must be accountability at the level of theater commanders when there are frequent failures at the strategic level.<sup>27</sup>

Ambassador Eikenberry’s polemic is a stunning example of Gladwell’s thesis. The power of the message and the source of the message reflect the stickiness factor.

Eikenberry assumes the strategic corporal is toxic and takes for granted the British doctrinal concept of compressed levels of war. He thus argues forcefully for another change to doctrine—reflecting the source of his knowledge about the truth of the strategic corporal—for more accountability from commanders—theater level commanders—who must be responsible for tactical actions. The power of the idea of the strategic corporal as a danger to strategic success shifts the perspective of senior commanders ready to exert authority over the chain of command. By implication this challenges the very senior level commanders view and utility of mid level commanders.

This perspective generates the greatest and most unfortunate consequence of this perverted idea. Trust between senior and subordinate leaders is sacrificed for the illusion

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27. Karl W. Eikenberry, “Reassessing the All-Volunteer Force,” *The Washington Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (Winter 2013): 17-19, [http://csis.org/files/publication/TWQ\\_13Winter\\_Eikenberry.pdf](http://csis.org/files/publication/TWQ_13Winter_Eikenberry.pdf) (accessed January 1, 2015).



of control over risk. This vacuum of trust erodes the U.S. military's philosophy of mission command. The Counterinsurgency Field Manual, 2008 Marine Corps Pamphlet, and Army Doctrinal Publication (ADP) 6-0 all emphasize the importance of mission command to, as the ADP 6-0 states, "empower agile and adaptive leaders in the conduct of unified land operations."<sup>28</sup> Trust is the bedrock of the mission command philosophy and enables the subordinate to exercise disciplined initiative.<sup>29</sup> But the power of the perverted idea of the strategic corporal negates mission command because it denies that subordinates can be trusted. Without trust and freedom of initiative senior commanders may restrict authorities and practice more detailed command while often implementing stifling control measures.<sup>30</sup> This is inefficient and extremely dangerous to the warfighting capabilities of the United States military.

Using Gladwell's model of the Tipping Point, we have seen how the original concept of the strategic corporal within a MOOTW context mutated into a threat to strategic outcomes in the GWOT. As Eikenberry's article reveals, the toxic variant has been elevated to an objective culturally inherited truth. Ambassador Eikenberry seemed convinced that contemporary warfare gave rise to an omnipotent corporal capable of triggering presidential action and threatening strategic outcomes because of a single-handed action. If this is true, then there must be facts and conditions that should reveal the truth of this idea. To test this idea, four case studies will examine an infamous incident of egregious battlefield misconduct spanning more than 42-years. The case

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28. Army Doctrinal Publication 6-0, *Mission Command*, (Washington DC: Headquarters United States Army, May 2012), 1.

29. Ibid. 2-3.

30. Lieutenant Colonel Thomas M. Feltey and Captain John F. Madden, "The Challenge of Mission Command," *Military Review Spotlight Article* (August 27, 2014), <http://usacac.army.mil/CAC2/MilitaryReview/repository/spotlight/Feltey-Aug-2014.pdf> (accessed January 1, 2015).

studies address; the Vietnam War's My Lai incident; the Iraq War's 2003 Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse incident; the Iraq War's 2006 Triangle of Death rape and family murder incident; and the 2012 Afghanistan Panjwai village massacre. If the idea of the toxic strategic corporal is correct, the case studies should demonstrate clear linkage between negative actions at the tactical level and immediate, irrevocable strategic consequences.



## CHAPTER 3

### CASE STUDY 1: VIETNAM: MY LAI

In some ways, the Vietnam War reflected Krulak's three-block concept writ large. Soldiers and Marines at the tactical level found themselves fighting the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) in high intensity combat, while others played the deadly game of hide and seek with the Viet Cong (VC) guerillas while pacifying villages and providing security to the population. The Vietnam War was the first war to feature near-real time images of battlefield action. The media's relatively unfettered access to the battlefield allowed average citizens an opportunity to view the war without government-sanitized images. These circumstances appear to be fertile ground for a strategic corporal to flourish. This chapter explores the potential impact of the strategic corporal by examining the My Lai massacre. The actions of the soldiers at My Lai will be connected to the political and strategic objectives during the time of the incident to assess the strategic effect of tactical actions.

#### *Strategic Objectives*

The overall policy objective of the war in Vietnam, as stated during President Johnson's address at Johns Hopkins on April 7, 1965, was, "the independence of South Vietnam and its freedom from attack."<sup>1</sup> In the summer of 1965, General William Westmoreland, Commander the U.S. Military Assistance Command-Vietnam, formulated a strategy of attrition to accomplish these policy goals. As the war continued, General Westmoreland and the Joint Chiefs of Staff published a more specific version of military strategic objectives shortly before the January 1968 Communist Tet offensive. The

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1. Lyndon B. Johnson, "U.S. Aims in Vietnam," public address, Johns Hopkins University, April 7, 1965, <http://www.vietnamwar.net/LBJ-2.htm> (accessed January 2, 2015).

objectives were: deterring the Chinese from direct intervention in Southeast Asia; defeating the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Armed (NVA) Forces in South Vietnam and forcing the withdrawal of the NVA forces; and finally, extending the Saigon government's control over all of South Vietnam.<sup>2</sup>

### *My Lai Massacre Summary*

On 16 March 1968, an American infantry battalion, known as Task Force Barker, conducted a three company operation to locate and eliminate enemy forces in the Vietnamese hamlet of My Lai. The air-mobile operations consisted of a substantial artillery preparation of the landing zones and the western portion of the hamlet. Intelligence reports indicated the population was sympathetic to the Viet Cong and enemy resistance would be strong. The infantry companies were to conduct search and attack operations to eliminate a Viet Cong battalion. Specific instructions from Captain Medina to his company (C/1-20 Infantry) were, "burn the houses, kill the livestock, and destroy the crops and foodstuff." He emphasized that the company would face fierce resistance and that no civilians were in the hamlet.<sup>3</sup> Captain Medina also reminded his men to be aggressive in closing with and destroying the enemy.

What followed at My Lai was nothing short of pure brutality. Infantry platoons randomly gunned down and bayoneted fleeing civilians throwing hand grenades into family dwellings as they passed.<sup>4</sup> Large groups of men, women, and children were rounded up and blown to pieces by American small arms fire.<sup>5</sup> Intermixed between the

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24. 2. Douglas Kinnard, *The War Managers*, 30th ed. (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2007),

3. William R. Peers, *The My Lai Inquiry* (New York: Norton, 1979), 170.

4. Ibid. 173.

5. Ibid. 175.

wanton killings were multiple instances of brutal gang rape and other barbaric actions.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, just as ordered, the hamlet burned, livestock was killed, and the crops and foodstuff was destroyed. Meanwhile, American forces were never fired upon, nor did the ground force request any fire support while Americans were on the ground.

All told, American soldiers ruthlessly murdered nearly 500 unarmed Vietnamese men, women, and children. However, this fact was covered up and never appropriately reported outside the 23<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division. Commanders from the company to the division level were implicated in this massive cover up.<sup>7</sup> As a result of a whistle blower's letter to Congress in March 1969, several senators began demanding the formal investigation eventually conducted by Army Lieutenant General William Peers. Later an independent investigative journalist, Seymour M. Hersh, released the story to the world on November 12, 1969.<sup>8</sup> In the weeks that followed, more reports and eyewitness accounts along with graphic pictures of the brutality surfaced. Reports detailed the atrocities of that day coupled with strong anti-war feelings firmly anchored My Lai into the collective memory of most Americans.

#### *Outcome and Effect on Strategic Objectives*

The incident has been extensively explored, with dozens of books recounting all the details and impacts of this singular barbaric event but noticeably absent is any reference to something that could be identified as the strategic corporal effect. The war was unpopular before My Lai and did not substantially change either the nature of combat or the conduct of the war. In fact, the war continued for American forces until

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6. Ibid.

7. Ibid. 199.

8. Jana Toppe, "Media Coverage of the My Lai Massacre," Free University of Berlin, [http://www.ifki.fu-berlin.de/academics/SummerSchool/Dateien2011/Presentation\\_Handouts/Handout - Meigs - September 16 - Toppe.pdf](http://www.ifki.fu-berlin.de/academics/SummerSchool/Dateien2011/Presentation_Handouts/Handout_Meigs_September_16_Toppe.pdf) (accessed January 2, 2015).

1973. The most damaging result from the My Lai incident appears to be the active cover up of the incident and the failure of the chain of command to take prudent and just actions to hold people accountable for their actions.

The strategic corporal as a threat to strategic outcomes in this case does not hold. First Lieutenant William Calley, who became the face of the My Lai massacre, should have played the role of the strategic corporal. His actions should have had a direct effect on U.S. strategy in Vietnam. Despite wide attention, Congressional and White House involvement and the direct oversight of the Secretary of Defense, no strategic effects were noted.

## CHAPTER 4

### CASE STUDY 2: IRAQ: ABU GHRAIB, PRISON TORTURE

The Iraq War (OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM) was fought under the spotlight of the global media, and the entire world followed the actions of coalition forces through embedded reporters, who broadcast stories of stoic courage, honor, and the bonds formed in small units to a world audience. Here, if anywhere, the danger of the strategic corporal could rear its ugly head; one mistake or rash action could potentially become a lead story for every media outlet in the world. Yet, nothing happened, and in the weeks and months that followed, there was less and less interest in the often confusing and dirty engagements in the streets of Iraqi cities.

#### *Strategic Objectives*

Unlike Vietnam, the United States had a much clearer national and theater strategy. In the 2002 National Security Strategy (NSS), President George W. Bush defined his policy as fighting for a just peace; defending the peace from terrorists and tyrants, and preserving the peace by building good relations among other countries.

In conjunction with the NSS, President Bush signed a National Security Presidential Directive on August 29, 2002 outlining his strategic guidance regarding Iraq. His guidance directed the military to: free Iraq in order to eliminate Iraqi weapons of mass destruction; end Iraqi threats to its neighbors; liberate the Iraqi people from tyranny and; assist them in creating a moderate, pluralist, and democratic nation. President Bush hinted at a desired end state of a U.S. friendly, free, and democratic nation in the heart of the Middle East.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 153-154, 283.

### *Summary of the Abu Ghraib Incident*

On the afternoon of 7 November 2003, a riot over the distribution of food had occurred at the Baghdad Central Confinement Facility, Abu Ghraib.<sup>2</sup> U.S. Military Police (MP) quickly assumed control of the prisoners, and segregated the seven instigating detainees who to another portion of the prison. As the detainees were in-processed into the hardstand cellblock area of the prison, Corporal Charles Graner, a guard from the 372<sup>nd</sup> MP Company, thought it necessary to teach these seven detainees that rioting was not condoned.<sup>3</sup> One of the other MPs, Specialist Sabrina Harman, noticed that one of the prisoners was detained for rape and segregated him from the others. Next, with the help of Graner, she pulled down the waist of the detainee's orange jumpsuit and scrawled "I'm a rapist[sic]" on his backside and thigh.<sup>4</sup> Two other young enlisted MPs joined and further escalated the abuse by, "stomping on the detainees' bare hands and feet with their combat boots."<sup>5</sup>

That night, the detainee abuse spiraled out of control. Detainees were stripped naked, forced to masturbate, were knocked out by closed hand punches to the temples, and positioned in demeaning sexually oriented positions—all while the guards posed for pictures with the prisoners like proud hunters over their fallen prey.<sup>6</sup> The abuse that evening seemed to be forgotten, but not for long.

Sometime in early January 2004, Specialist Joseph Darby, a MP with the same 372<sup>nd</sup> MP Company, secretly passed a compact disc to the Abu Ghraib Criminal

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2. Christopher Graveline and Michael Clemens, *The Secrets of Abu Ghraib Revealed: American Soldiers On Trial* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books Inc., 2010), 1.

3. Graveline and Clemens, 3.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid. 4-7.

Investigative Division (CID) agents. The compact disc contained numerous photos of detainee abuse. The CID agents wasted no time in beginning a full investigation and soon everyone in the chain of command including the theater commander, Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez, was aware of the detainee abuse.<sup>7</sup>

On April 28, 2004, CBS reporter Dan Rather released the first images of the 372<sup>nd</sup> MP Company's depravity on a primetime episode *60 Minutes II*. American leaders absorbed the world's outrage which threatened the perception of the U.S. military as honorable liberators. World leaders and the United Nations rebuked American behavior, and called for detainees to be offered the full protection of the Geneva Conventions. Disgust and disappointment permeated the world news and fostered increased Iraqi distrust of the American occupiers making it more difficult for soldiers to conduct operations among the people.

#### *Outcome and Effect on Strategic Objectives*

The effects from the Abu Ghraib detainee abuse incident were immediate. Major General Antonia Taguba, assigned as the investigative officer, focused the investigation on the detainee abuse and identifying other contributing factors. His investigation concluded the detainee abuse stemmed from; an ineffective command organization, a poor command climate from company through brigade, and insufficiently trained soldiers assigned to a detainment facility mission.<sup>8</sup> His investigation ultimately resulted in the conviction of all the perpetrators of abuse and the administrative punishment of most of the officers in the chain of command up to and including the brigade commander. Unlike My Lai, the military chain of command took immediate action to hold accountable those

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7. Ibid. 53-54.

8. Ibid. 55.

guilty of misconduct. Additionally, the investigation produced sufficient evidence indicating other factors, well outside the MP brigade, significantly contributed to the environment of abuse at Abu Ghraib.

Multiple other investigations conducted by the military regarding techniques and procedures for detention and interrogation resulted in the Final Report of the Independent Panel to Review Department of Defense Detention Operations, known as the Schlesinger Report. The Schlesinger Report itself generated the most lasting strategic damage. The Schlesinger Report concluded that there was a clear relationship between, “abstract political acts by high officials in Washington and illegal actions by simple soldiers in Baghdad.”<sup>9</sup> The report linked enhanced interrogation techniques authorized by the President to be used on detainees at the Guantanamo Bay detainment facility with detainment facilities in both Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>10</sup> It provided examples of regular military prison guards in Iraq assigned with duties of “setting the conditions” for successful interrogations.<sup>11</sup> The Schlesinger Report, which was publically released to the entire world in 2004, essentially revealed that the United States government officially condoned torture. The Schlesinger Report further concluded that, “the damages these incidents have done to U.S. policy, to the image of the U.S. among populations whose support we need in the Global War on Terror and to the morale of our armed forces, must not be repeated.”<sup>12</sup>

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9. Steven Strasser, *The Abu Ghraib Investigations: the Official Reports of the Independent Panel and Pentagon On the Shocking Prisoner Abuse in Iraq*, ed. Steven Strasser with an introduction by Craig R. Whitney (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004), XVIII.

10. Ibid. 8.

11. Strasser, 9-10.

12. Ibid. XXII.



This historical case study concludes that the Abu Ghraib incident was the proximate cause of most likely irreversible damage to the United States' Iraq and Middle East strategy. The strategic corporals of Abu Ghraib were merely carrying out a policy of enhanced interrogations and unlawful statuses that were inconsistent with established international practices, but condoned by higher levels of leadership. The Abu Ghraib incident could confirm the threat of the strategic corporal due to the severe effects of the incident on U.S. strategic goals. However, the actions of these strategic corporals were not considered to be individual actions (like My Lai), but actions reflecting a misconstrued understanding of command guidance. This revelation severely undermined the core tenants of President Bush's National Security Strategy and his goals for Iraq outlined in the Presidential Security Directive.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **CASE STUDY 3: IRAQ: BLACKHEARTS RAPE AND MURDER**

The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 502<sup>nd</sup> Infantry (known as the Blackhearts) deployed to the Mahmudiyah region, south of Baghdad, in October 2005. The region was informally known as the triangle of death because of intense sectarian violence between Sunni and Shia Muslims—with American forces and fledgling Iraqi security forces attempting to assert control. The initial invasion with its major combat operations was long over. It was replaced with an ultra violent insurgency exacting the worst casualties American forces faced since Vietnam. Under resourced and ill-prepared for a counter insurgency campaign, the 502<sup>nd</sup> Infantry was dispersed over wide urban areas with enormous populations. It was typical for companies and platoons to operate in isolation. It was also common for American battalions to generate ad hoc security assistance teams to partner with Iraqi Army and Police units.<sup>1</sup> This chapter explores the potential impact of the strategic corporal by examining the 2005 Blackhearts rape and murder incident. Since the overall political and strategic objectives during this incident are unchanged from the Abu Ghraib case study, this chapter first begins with a brief summary of the incident; and concludes with observations regarding the overall strategic impact of the incident.

#### *Summary of the Blackhearts Rape and Murder Incident*

In support of its parent battalion, B/1-502<sup>nd</sup> Infantry conducted wide area security operations in the northwest portion of the battalion's area of operation. Dominating the company's area was a main road (Route Sportster) that cut through the heart of the battalion area of operations and connected Forward Operating Base (FOB) Yusufiyah

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1. Jim Frederick, *Black Hearts: One Platoon's Plunge Into Madness in the Triangle of Death* (New York: Crown, 2010), 37.

with other high-speed secondary roads. Route Sportster was a high-speed road that was essential for the battalion's freedom of movement, while simultaneously reducing the insurgent's mobility. B/1-502<sup>nd</sup> Infantry's tasks included controlling Route Sportster, occupying a patrol base at a large concrete bridge spanning a river known as Jurf al-Sukr Bridge (JSB), and guarding FOB Yusufiyah while providing a quick reaction force in case of an emergency.<sup>2</sup>

The intense grind of daily combat operations stretched the company and its leaders to their limits. Company and platoon leadership proved ineffective as casualties mounted and morale plummeted. Worst yet, members of first platoon no longer viewed Iraqis as human.<sup>3</sup> As combat operations continued to draw units to different locations, individual vehicles consisting of only four to six soldiers were typically being employed in a series of traffic control points along Route Sportster.

On 12 March 2005, during the early morning hours of those long and mundane traffic control point missions, Specialists Green and Barker began expressing ideations of murder and rape with the other members of their gun-truck.<sup>4</sup> As noon rolled around, the soldiers began drinking Iraqi whiskey. The soldiers grew drunker and drunker and soon the idea of rape and murder materialized into action. Four soldiers, including Green and Barker, disguised themselves and headed on foot to a house where they previously observed a young Iraqi girl. The four soldiers entered the family's home and forced them all into a bedroom. One soldier grabbed the fourteen-year-old Iraqi girl and pulled her into the living room and proceeded to rape her. Meanwhile, Green executed the other three family members with his shotgun and an AK-47 assault rifle. The men next took

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2. Frederick, 62-64.

3. Ibid. 242.

4. Ibid. 258-259.

turns raping the young girl, killing her with a shot to the head when they were finished. Finally, the four soldiers doused all the bodies with kerosene and burned them. Quickly the soldiers ran back to their vehicle to clean themselves and to burn their uniforms.<sup>5</sup>

On 16 June 2005, the Iraqi insurgents struck back. In revenge for the death of the Janabi family, three American soldiers were abducted from a checkpoint not far from where the murders and rape took place and were subsequently eviscerated and beheaded. The emotion toll was too much to handle for a young soldier, Private First Class Justin Watt. Watt had previously learned of the murders from members of his platoon, and finally revealed to a trusted sergeant what he had heard.<sup>6</sup> Soon, the entire chain of command was aware of the allegations and on 24 June 2005, Major General Thurman, the division commander, notified CID of the incident.<sup>7</sup>

#### *Outcome and Effect on Strategic Objectives*

The first news article published regarding the Blackhearts incident was in the *New York Times* on 1 July 2006. The article outlined the incident and reported that that a thorough investigation was being conducted. The article also quoted Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, who lashed out at the American military stating, “that violence against Iraqi civilians by American troops was a regular occurrence.”<sup>8</sup> Another *New York Times* article published on 10 July 2006 reported a massive outbreak of sectarian violence in Baghdad, as the new al-Maliki government struggled to control Baghdad. This article, without any evidence at all, linked the sectarian violence to an announcement of another

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5. Ibid. 265-270.

6. Ibid. 317-320.

7. Ibid. 323.

8. Edward Wong, “G.I.’s Investigated in Slaying of 4 and Rape in Iraq,” *New York Times*, July 1, 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/07/01/world/01iraq.html> (accessed January 3, 2015).

soldier charged in relation to the Blackheart incident indicating a cause and effect relationship between the crime and sectarian violence.<sup>9</sup>

Domestic and international news followed the story consistently over the next several years as trials progressed. The majority of the news simply reported the status of the trials and convictions over a three-year period. The closest the Blackheart incident appears to have made a tangible impact at the strategic level, was in July 2006 when the Iraqi justice minister and Prime Minister al-Maliki threatened to re-evaluate the status of forces agreement, which allowed the United States to retain criminal jurisdiction over American forces.<sup>10</sup>

So, this case study concludes that the strategic corporals of the Blackheart incident did not produce a real and tangible effect to the strategic outcome of the war. Iraqi leaders emotionally expressed their outrage and growing frustration felt by the Iraqi government over the rising number of Iraqi civilian deaths while American leaders apologized and promised justice. The Blackheart strategic corporals like the My Lai soldiers, had no direct strategic effect on the course or conduct of the war.

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9. Kirk Semple, "Sectarian Clashes-Baghdad Erupts in Mob Violence," New York Times, July 10, 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/07/10/world/middleeast/10iraq.html> (accessed January 3, 2015).

10. Ryan Lenz, "U.S. Military Fears Outcome of Rape Trial," *The Associated Press*, July 17, 2006, <http://abcnews.go.com/International/print?id=2199745> (accessed January 3, 2015)

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **CASE STUDY 4: AFGHANISTAN: 2012 PANJWAI MASSACRE**

The war in Afghanistan, formally known as OPERATION ENDURING FREEDOM, began on 7 October 2001 in response to the devastating al-Qaida attacks in the United States on 11 September 2001. The Afghan War was initiated with a number of precision air delivered strikes on critical infrastructure followed by an unconventional style war led by American Special Forces and elements of Afghanistan's anti-Taliban faction—the Northern Alliance. Initial operations in Afghanistan were proceeding reasonably well by all accounts—violence was down and efforts to build a new Afghan government and security force were well under way. However, as American emphasis and resources were shifted to Iraq between 2004 and 2008, the Taliban counterattacked in 2009 and seized the initiative in Afghanistan's southern and eastern provinces.

In response to Taliban success, the United States in conjunction with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) conducted a wholesale review and strategic assessment. General Stanley McChrystal, the commander of ISAF, implemented a new population centric counterinsurgency strategy in late 2009 resulting in NATO and Afghan forces retaking the initiative by the spring 2010.

McChrystal's new strategy discarded the search and attack mission mentality and instead focused on working very closely with the Afghan population and its nascent security forces. An innovation of this strategy was called village security operations (VSO). VSO placed a Special Forces detachment in remote Afghan villages intimately partnered with Afghan local police in order to provide an enduring capability to defeat the Taliban. The mission achieved significant initial results, and during the summer of

2010 a small number of conventional infantry units began reinforcing Special Forces village security platforms.

### *Strategic Objectives*

Similar to the Iraq strategy, the United States had clear national and theater strategic objectives for Afghanistan. The 2010 National Security Strategy (NSS), seeks to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al-Qaida and its violent extremist affiliates in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and around the world.<sup>1</sup> Specific to Afghanistan, the NSS seeks to: partnering with Afghan forces to target the insurgency and to secure key population centers, and increase efforts to train Afghan security forces to allow a gradual security transition to Afghan force control as U.S. and NATO combat units are redeployed.

At the theater level, the NATO Comprehensive Strategic and Political-Military Plan served the main source of Afghan strategy. ISAF defined its strategic mission as:

ISAF, in partnership with the Afghan Government and the international community, conducts comprehensive, population-centric counterinsurgency operations in order to: protect the Afghan people; neutralize insurgent networks; develop Afghan National Security Forces; and support the establishment of legitimate governance and sustainable socio-economic institutions.<sup>2</sup>

Additionally, as the framework nation for ISAF, United States forces in Afghanistan have a complementary mission which operationalizes the strategy defined in the 2010 NSS.

The U.S. Mission in Afghanistan was defined as:

The goal of the United States is to disrupt, dismantle, and eventually defeat al Qaeda, and to prevent its return to either Afghanistan or Pakistan. The specific objectives in Afghanistan are to deny safe haven to al Qaeda and to deny the Taliban the ability to overthrow the Afghan Government. To support these objectives, U.S.

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1. Barack H. Obama, *National Security Strategy* (Washington, DC: The White House, May 2010), 19.

2. U.S. Department of Defense, *Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan*, U.S. Department of Defense (October, 2011)  
[http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/October\\_2011\\_Section\\_1230\\_Report.pdf](http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/October_2011_Section_1230_Report.pdf) (accessed January 4, 2015), 7.

and coalition forces will continue to degrade the Taliban insurgency in order to provide time and space to increase the capacity of the Afghan National Security Forces and the Afghan Government so they can assume the lead for Afghanistan's security by the end of 2014.<sup>3</sup>

### *Summary of the 2012 Panjwai Massacre Incident*

In support of the ongoing population centric counterinsurgency operations in Regional Command-South, a conventional Stryker infantry battalion (2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry) was reorganized to support village stability operations. Soldiers and leaders were dispersed over much of the northern and southern regions of Afghanistan. Staff Sergeant Robert Bales was assigned to a village support platform at Camp Belambi, in Panjwai district in 2012. Acting alone, Staff Sergeant Bales donned a traditional Afghan coat over his army uniform and exited the camp and initiated a killing spree unlike any single event America has witnessed since the 1968 My Lai Massacre.

On two separate trips made during the evening of 11 March, Bales, walked over a mile from his base and methodically murdered sixteen Afghans, including nine children in their homes.<sup>4</sup> He later gathered some of the bodies and set them afire.<sup>5</sup> Bales returned to the Camp Belambi after his second trip and surrendered himself and reportedly confessed to what he had done.<sup>6</sup> Staff Sergeant Bales was immediately taken into custody and an investigation was launched.

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3. Ibid.

4. Taimoor Shah and Graham Bowley, "U.S. Sergeant Is Said to Kill 16 Civilians in Afghanistan," *New York Times*, March 11, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/12/world/asia/afghanistan-civilians-killed-american-soldier-held.html?pagewanted=all> (accessed January 4, 2015).

5. Taimoor Shah, "Days of Horror and Grief: Reporting the Panjwai Massacre," *New York Times*, November 9, 2012, [http://atwar.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/11/09/days-of-horror-and-grief-reporting-the-panjwai-massacre/?smid=tw-share&\\_r=0](http://atwar.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/11/09/days-of-horror-and-grief-reporting-the-panjwai-massacre/?smid=tw-share&_r=0) (accessed January 4, 2015).

6. Martha Raddatz, Nick Schiffrin, and Aleem Agha, "Afghan Massacre Suspect: 'I Did It'," *ABC News*, March 13, 2012, <http://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/afghan-delegation-fire-site-massacre/story?id=15908068#.T2E3o8UltIM> (accessed January 4, 2015).



### *Outcome and Effect on Strategic Objectives*

Bales' murders became known as the Panjwai massacre. The news was immediately transmitted around the world where it was met with shock and outrage. Afghan President Hamid Karzai called it the "unforgivable crime" while President Obama called the killings "tragic and shocking," and offered his condolences to the Afghan people during a telephone call to President Karzai.<sup>7</sup> Protests were staged across Afghanistan for a few days as a result of the Panjwai massacre, but were insignificant in comparison to the protest and violence of Quran burning incidents. Concurrent with this event came reports that in mid February 2012, U.S. service members inappropriately disposed of a number of Qurans that were used at the Parwan detention facility. Mass protests raged across the country and six U.S. servicemen were killed by Afghan security forces—in Kandahar, Nangarhar, and Kabul Provinces.<sup>8</sup> In late March of 2012, Afghan security forces killed another three NATO servicemen, allegedly attributed to the Panjwai massacre. These killings were considered acts of revenge to perceived American insults to Afghan honor.<sup>9</sup>

Afghan and domestic news continued to follow the courts martial of Staff Sergeant Bales until he admitted guilt in 2013 to avoid the death penalty. The closest tangible effect at the strategic level the Panjwai Massacre appears to have made was the

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7. Sara Sidner, "U.S. soldier accused of Afghan killing spree," *CNN*, March 11, 2012, [http://www.cnn.com/2012/03/11/world/asia/afghanistan-us-service-member/index.html?hpt=hp\\_t2](http://www.cnn.com/2012/03/11/world/asia/afghanistan-us-service-member/index.html?hpt=hp_t2) (accessed January 4, 2015).

8. Deb Riechmann, "Green On Blue Attacks: NATO Troops Killed by Afghanistan Soldiers," *Associated Press*, March 26, 2012, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/03/26/green-on-blue-afghanistan\\_n\\_1379259.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/03/26/green-on-blue-afghanistan_n_1379259.html) (accessed January 4, 2015).

9. For an in-depth study and further discussion regarding causes for Afghan green-on-blue fratricides see Dr. Jeffrey Bordin's white paper titled, "A Crisis of Trust and Cultural Incompatibility," <http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB370/docs/Document%2011.pdf>.

suspension of negotiations on a bilateral pact with the United States while Afghan lawmakers sought a trial for Bales in Afghanistan. President Karzai tried to force a change in strategy by pushing NATO forces to withdraw from the villages.<sup>10</sup> These threats were short lived; on 1 May 2012, President Obama and President Karzai signed the Enduring Strategic Partnership Agreement and NATO forces continued to operate from small combat outposts within Afghan villages until well into late 2013.<sup>11</sup> So, similar to the Blackhearts incident, the actions of Staff Sergeant Bales, as the strategic corporal, did not produce a real and tangible effect to the strategic outcome of the war or led to a change in policy.

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10. James Brazier, "Massacre of civilians deals blow to US-Afghan strategic security agreement," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, April 1, 2012, <http://search.proquest.com.nduezproxy.idm.oclc.org/docview/929146222?accountid=12686>, (accessed January 4, 2015).

11. U.S. Department of State, "Enduring Strategic Partnership Agreement between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States of American," May 1, 2012, *United States Treaties and Other International Agreements*, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/2012.06.01u.s.-afghanistanspasignedtext.pdf> (accessed January 4, 2015).

## **CHAPTER 7**

### **EVALUATION AND DISCUSSION**

The four case studies test the perceived truism that has crept into doctrine and military thinking: the strategic corporal can shape larger strategic outcomes through individual actions. To forestall this potential calamity, theater levels commanders need to be concerned with controlling what happens in the combat zone. By implication this means that subordinate commanders must spend additional effort to control their units and supervise actions to contain potentially irreparable events from escalation and undermining strategic objectives.

As the case studies illustrate, the strategic corporal's actions have little or no bearing on strategic outcomes or national policy. The case studies selected the most egregious acts by individuals or tactical groups (platoons, squads) within an all-pervasive media environment. These events attracted world attention and condemnation and forced military and civilian officials to react. In every case, no significant strategic results were noted. There were some reverberations, such as in Abu Ghraib, but otherwise the atrocities changed nothing. These case studies support Gladwell's theory of the Tipping Point and how information and understanding shifts with a change in context or condition. As the survey of American, Australian, and British doctrinal writings illustrate, the idea of the strategic corporal morphs within a MOOTW context in 1997 to its inverted mirror equivalent in the 2003-2013 GWOT. The perceived truism of the toxic strategic corporal, as demonstrated by the case studies, is a myth.

As a result of this case studies presented, the body of evidence suggests that the strategic corporal's action produced no tangible and lasting effect of the U.S. wartime strategic objectives. The evidence also suggests that an accumulation of tactical errors,

particularly instances that produced civilian casualties, violated cultural and religious sensitivities, and infringed established international norms produced significant pressure on strategic level leaders for action, but had no effect on strategy and policy.

In the cases of the My Lai and Panjwai massacres, the strategic outcomes were never close to being altered. The Abu Ghraib incident was potentially the closest singular event in producing a strategic effect because those strategic corporals exposed a government policy that was vastly inconsistent with American values and international norms for human rights. It was those policies, written by strategic leaders that created strategic chaos, not the soldiers' criminal behavior, per se. Strategic risk is very real and results from an imbalance between ends, ways, and means, not from an erroneous tactical action.

## CHAPTER 8

### CONCLUSION and RECOMMENDATIONS

Ambassador Eikenberry's article is a prime example of the danger of an idea that tipped in connotation from good to bad. Eikenberry accepts without question an idea that appears doctrinally based and presents it as an immutable truth—to the detriment of effective command and control. The damage done to the United States' philosophy of mission command and its mantra of disciplined initiative is severe as seen during recent combat operations in Afghanistan.

Soon after General Stanley McChrystal assumed command of ISAF in 2009, he implemented a series of restrictive tactical directives designed to limit civilian casualties. The issue is not McChrystal's actions to refine small unit battlefield tactics, techniques, and procedures to limit collateral damage, but that some major subordinate commanders further restricted the actions of small unit commanders to a point where small unit leaders felt as if they were fighting the enemy with their hands tied behind their backs.<sup>1</sup> Experience in Afghanistan demonstrates these further restrictive control measures were emplaced in a misguided effort to control risk emanating at the lowest of tactical levels. Whereas, General Patraeus later clarified, "that no one could add further restrictions to what was in that [tactical] directive," detailed and cumbersome procedures were still emplaced that required battalion level commanders to seek permission from the division commander to conduct operations above the platoon level.<sup>2</sup> This bureaucratic approval process strikes at the bond of trust between commanders.

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1. John Banusiewicz, "Patraeus Explains Afghanistan Strategy," *Department of Defense News*, September 3, 2010, <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=60737> (accessed February 16, 2015).

2. Ibid.

Tracing the roots of the idea of a strategic corporal and seeing how it mutated from 1997 to 2013 is essential to understanding the phenomenon of the strategic corporal. Moreover, the unintended consequences due to the change in environmental context while applying Gladwell's Tipping Point model shows the erroneous state of the final idea. The case studies serve as a test of this shibboleth. Does the strategic corporal's action have direct linkages to strategic outcomes? Each case study indicates no or minimal influence. Without question, the accumulation of tactical missteps complicates the political and strategic environment, but it is only misaligned or destructive policies being implemented by tactical actors that damage the strategic or political outcome during a conflict. As such, the idea of the strategic corporal must be reevaluated.

#### *Recommendations*

Krulak was right, it is in fact *leadership* that matters most in decentralized and dispersed operations. Whereas, the strategic outcomes were never really affected, a lack of prudent leadership was *always* a factor bearing on battlefield indiscipline and the creation of tension within the political and strategic landscape. In hindsight, it seems many in the military drew the wrong conclusion from Krulak's speech. It is not the actual decision the corporal makes that matters most; it is the journey of professional development a young leader traverses prior to that decision. However, in order to make a decision a subordinate leader must have the trust of senior commanders along with its corresponding authorities.

Trust is the bedrock of the military's mission command. Trust is usually something that is earned in training scenarios that replicate combat as closely as possible. Unfortunately this time tested regime of earning trust, between subordinates and

superiors and vice versa was a casualty during the military's unrelenting preparation for combat in Iraq and Afghanistan. Complicating matters further, often times brigade combat teams and even battalions and companies were deployed under a non-habitually aligned division or brigade that had little to no relationship prior to arriving in theater. Although no leader would ever dare publically state he did not trust his subordinate commanders, the demonstrated actions of superior commanders indicated otherwise. Higher-level commanders feared the untested strategic corporal and therefore restricted authorities to commanders far removed from the corporal's or even the company's area of operations.

Trust in the military must be assumed until that vital relationship is severed by demonstrated imprudence or incompetence. With the myth of the strategic corporal debunked, leaders at all levels must renew their vows of trust with subordinates. This renewal of trust must begin by removing any recognizable trace or reference of tactical actions having negative consequences at the strategic level within doctrinal manuals. Comments like these serve no purpose. They are akin to reminding motorists that their individual automobile usage may affect global warming. These comments also inadvertently influence general staffs to resort to bureaucratic approval processes to seemingly control all sorts of tactical risks.

This paper illustrates how a bad idea can permeate a culture and threaten its integrity. The strategic corporal's new toxic idea—now recognized as a myth—must be rejected and completely eliminated. Senior commanders and doctrinal manuals must replace the idea of the strategic corporal with the idea of junior leaders operating within

an empowering environment of trust. This is essential to the health and effectiveness of military units and must be restored.



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